RESEARCH PLAN PROPOSAL

The Black Mother: Trauma and Transformation with Reference to the Selected Works of Toni Morrison.

For registration to the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Research Problem:

The present age has been rightly called the second renaissance of Afro-American fiction with female writers as the major component. These novelists have been writing mainly about the issues of race, sex and class faced by Black women in the contemporary American society. The Black woman is a hybrid personality who traces her roots to Africa and yet longs for her identity in American society. Although during the last decades Black Women's literature has gained a considerable attention, but it still remains vague and unquestioned in terms of race and gender.

For a black woman racial discrimination together with gender discrimination is a lethal combination. This dual oppression is found to have existed since decades. The Black women's problems are hidden within the larger framework of the issues of race and gender. The boundary between the two is so narrow that sometimes it becomes difficult to distinguish between them. Therefore it is necessary that these issues be dealt from the women's perspective.

Issues of authenticity are also important in African- American literature as they are an attempt to recover the silenced or repressed history. Parallels between narratives about slavery, motherhood and maternity are made to add wholeness to the rich experience of this cultural heritage. Among the contemporary writers, Toni Morrison has acquired considerable attention as the voice of Black women and she deals with these issues in a more sensitive manner.

In her essay, "The Site of Memory", Toni Morrison has insisted upon the responsibility that the modern Afro –American writers have towards the past, and upon the necessity of "ripping the veil" which has been drawn upon certain black facts and experience. Examining her literary heritage and more important by the slave narratives- "the print origins of Black literature"- she became aware of the blanks left by the early authors and of the constraints under which they were worked. "

In my thesis I will analyze the selected works of Toni Morrison. My thrust area in the novels of Toni Morrison will be on the theme of motherhood, which is persistent and is rendered as entirely different perspective in each of her novels.

The main questions that I will seek to find answers to regarding the works of Toni Morrison are: Why does a black mother have a troubled relationship with her children? What are the traumatic experiences which affect the psyche of the black mother? What makes her kill her daughter, or sell her daughter-- as an expression of motherly love? How is motherhood treated with a new dimension in each novel? How and why is a black mother different from a white mother?

To answer these questions I will compare and contrast the short stories and novels, relevant to the theme of my research, analyzing each for the psychological implications of trauma in the context of the transformation and the resultant effect that it has on the mother-daughter and mother-son relationship. I will also refer to the autobiographical and other historical material that has contributed to the writer's perspective on this theme.

Background

Maternal acts are not an act of sentimentality in the works of Toni Morrison, as mothers in her novels commit infanticide. They are whipped, sold, brutally abused, hanged and treated as objects. Though the Black mommy or mammy is a very obsessed figure in Morrison's works, Morrison describes motherhood as a positive experience- a source of empowerment for children, community and the mothers themselves. For the writer, motherhood provides them with essential skills and traits to be good managers or to provide with something which someone can use.

As O'Reilly documents, Morrison's most cited and most delightful description of motherhood-as-liberation comes from an interview with Bill Moyers:

There was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother. For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened to me. . . . Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of a normal 'other.' The children's demands on me were things that nobody ever asked me to do. To be a good manager. To have a sense of humor. To deliver something that somebody could use. And they were not interested in all the things that other people were interested in, like what I was wearing or if I were sensual. . . . Somehow all of the baggage that I had accumulated as a person about what was valuable just fell away. I could not only be me -- whatever that was -- but somebody actually needed me to be that. . . . If you listen to [your children], somehow you are able to free yourself from baggage and vanity and all sorts of things, and deliver a better self, one that you like. The person that was in me that I liked best was the one my children seemed to want.

Through the portrayal of a violent, and terribly fraught mother- child experience, she demonstrates the importance of black mother to be "a ship and a safe harbor for the community's survival". Motherhood in Toni Morrison is about personal and political empowerment, an act of resistance, integral and important for the Black people in their fight against racism and sexism, and to enable them to

achieve well-being for themselves and the people of their community. The emotional strength of her novels lies in the focus on loss and longing, shaped by the virulent forces of American racism, sexism and class, making her stories poignant.

As Morrison stated in her interview in 1997 in *Essence*:

As Black women our history is of a woman who can build a safe home and have some children and there was no problem in it……What we have known is to be complete human beings so that we did not let education keep us from our nurturing abilities. To lose that is to diminish ourselves unnecessarily. It is not a conflict. It is not a question. You do not give up anything, you have to choose your responsibilities.

According to Morrison the central acts of Black mother are preserving, nurturing and providing the cultural bearing. But the absence of these tasks leads to both personal and cultural destruction.

In my thesis I wish to study the novels of Toni Morrison to understand the psychological impact of trauma on these Black mothers and the transformed figure of motherhood depicted by the writer in her novels.

Mothers in her novels are individuals with a broken spirit and shattered self. It is not an easy but a tensed relationship between mother and child. They are not flawless mothers, but they express their unconditional love in unorthodox ways. The conditions of mothering show Black women's existence warped by the conditions of slavery. To analyses the psyche of the Black mothers it is important to understand the severity of the years of slavery, and the shadows left in the unconscious of these mothers as depicted in her novels. To be a mother is a role which the society expects to be fulfilled effectively. The norms concerning gender roles and the expected role of a mother is impossible to attain. Elaine Showalter examines the situation of mothers and points out that "children are compensation for the surrender of femininity. Child birth is not a victory but the acceptance of a compulsion of giving in and giving up".

The positive and negative aspects reach other dimensions when we understand the effects of slavery on these Black women and the struggle that they face in raising their children. As Dayle B. De Leancey argues a black mother is caged, with no escape for her. The absence of father, together with the economic and emotional burden becomes lethal, as the mother is the provider of the home while he keeps away. The task of a black mother is to teach her children to be proud of their culture, warped by the memory of the utter grief when white men sold her as slave. It is the society's racism and the impact of slavery which make her survival difficult in the patriarchal environment.

The strain on the mothers in the novels of Toni Morrison is revealed in the expression of love. DeLeancey can be quoted in this respect when she describes what she regards as the trinity of mother love: "…a trinity of mother love's lethal possibilities: mother love as a destructive force that 'kills' by burdening a mother in the realm of the material, mother love that 'kills' by burdening a mother in the realm of the emotional, and mother love that – quite simply and literally – kills". This study hopes to argue that what is revealed in Morrison's novels is in fact the result of slavery; fathers leave because absence is what they were forced to experience during slavery and as a consequence the mother becomes the sole provider, facing emotional and financial difficulties. With this in mind Morrison's novels reveal how protecting their children leads to drastic measures.

Being a Black mother is a difficult duty under the extreme pressures of a racist society. Betty J. Parker interviewed Morrison asking, 'if her female characters were the female prototype of present Black women,' to which she answered: "There is something inside us that makes us different from other people. It is not like men and not like white women". There is a description of African culture in the role of these Black mothers. As Renita Weems points out: "Morrison pays tribute to all those Black women in her life who are doing everything in their life , but what they are supposed to do; to be creative mothers".

In Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved* there are the brutal aspects of motherhood which other writers do not portray. The mothers in these two novels not only have to bring up their daughters, but also to teach them about the obstacles that they would face in the oppressive society in which they were raised. They tell them

about the injustices of racism. In *Beloved* when a mother commits the heinous act of killing her daughter, we are introduced to the complexities of motherhood, and how it can be an awful experience for a black woman; but the narrative has to be understood from the mother's point of view. Sethe, in *Beloved* is a mother who acts outside the motherly conventions and is considered as a bad mother. But it is not the authority to give and take life that makes her a strong woman, but her powerlessness because she is a Black mother. She kills her daughter because death remains the only exit to get free from the clutches of the society. She cannot fight from the evils of the society she is living in which treats her as an object. This state of helplessness initiates her towards doing such a heinous act.

In *Sula* there are similarities and differences from one generation to another. We have female characters who are single mothers. We have three generations living together but with no interaction as compared to the earlier novel where there was an unsaid understanding between the mother and daughter. Eva in *Sula* is a mother who sacrifices her body part and keeps herself away from her children in order to sustain her family. Thus her love for her children is diminished.

A Mercy published in 2009 opens with a confession of a slave girl Florens whose mother chooses her over her baby brother to be traded as payment of a debt to her master. Mother love acquires a different bond in this novel from blood relation to a different bonding between all female characters-- Sorrow changes her name to Complete after giving birth to a child(father unknown); Lina takes care of Florens till she leaves her for a free blacksmith; Rebbeca, whose four children die immediately after they are born, mothers Lina until Jacob (their master) dies. It is after the death of Jacob that each women slips into an insecure and lonely world. The novel centers on the theme of ecstasy and agony of the mother, set against the backdrop of the American society of 1680, when the institution of racism did not influence the conditions of slaves very much.

Motherhood is a persistent theme in the novels of Toni Morrison. In *Jazz* lack of motherly love and absence of a motherly figure affects not only the lives of the two main characters but also the lives that Joe and Violet touch. It is this absence

which causes the problems in the lives of Joe and Violet. Because they grew up alone, they are not able to recognize their real self.

Andrea O'Reilly, who is an Associate Professor in the School of Women's Studies at York University and President of the Association for Research on Mothering, says in her book, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, that in *Jazz* the "emphasis is upon the reclamation of the lost selfhood of the un mothered child". Her statement points out that although Joe and Violet have these problems, they are able to overcome them in the end through accepting their mothers and themselves.

In *Paradise* her other novel, Morrison presents mother as one who is responsible for fostering values and perceptions of self-identity in her children. In this novel the complex relationship between mother and daughter is evident in the relations between Delia, Patricia and Billie Delia. Delia dies during childbirth; her daughter Patricia grows up without a mother and this in turn also affects her relationship with her daughter Billie Delia. Not only the biological mothers but even the other women in the Convent, in the novel, adopt the role of ideal mothers in their absence to fill the gaps and take care of the girls in the Convent.

Collins defines one perception of mothering: “…..motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment". She further states that "others see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism".

Research Methodology:

My research methodology would comprise interpreting and analyzing the selected primary sources of the novelist. I will support my findings with a significant number of critical writings on these works which also deal with the similar theme of motherhood in contemporary times.

To make my interpretations more significant and relevant, I would work within the specific guidelines of critical theories. The above mentioned novels of Toni Morrison would be critically evaluated within the framework of the Trauma theory. Trauma theory provides the guideline to study the impact of traumatic events such as neglect, sexual and domestic abuse and violence, and their effects on personality development, and relationships. It also provides an understanding of the kinds of responses to these traumatic events which include fighting back or attacking, freezing or numbing at the moment, or, running away from the place. These repeated and ongoing events form complex trauma, where as a single event is characterized as a simple trauma. The stress disorders resulting from these events can be seen in the personality of these people.

My primary attempt would be to study the impact of trauma on the psychology of those characters that have undergone such traumatic experiences in their life. These traumatic events are relived by them through dreams or memories. The main questions I would investigate are- How does trauma distort the psyche of the Black mother? What is the reason behind the troubled mother- daughter relationship? How this relationship has its impact on the personality of the children of these Black mothers? Therefore, the primary objective of my study would be an in depth analysis of an entirely new dimension of this relationship in her novels.

My thesis would be significant in role of a mother in society. My areas of exploration would be: How do we perceive the motherhood in literature? How and why is a black mother different from a white mother? What is the reason behind their actions and their distorted personalities? How is it different from a normal mother-child relationship?

To support my findings i would compare and contrast the figure of the Black mother as depicted in the works of some other novelists. I would also support my findings with other historical and autobiographical material.

Tentative Chapter Plan:

1. Slavery and its Implications: Socio – cultural conflict
2. Trauma and the Black Woman
3. Psyche of the Black Mother
4. Mothers in the novels of Toni Morrison
5. Mother- daughter relationship in the novels of Toni Morrison
6. Conclusion

Tentative Chapter Outline:

1.Slavery and its Implications: Socio- cultural conflict

The first chapter would be an introductory chapter on slavery and its implications on the society and culture of the Black women. The devastating effects of slavery are explicit in the oppression suffered by these people in the psychological, social, cultural as well as political domain. In this chapter I would mainly focus on the implications of the lethal combination of slavery and racism on the Black women.

2. Trauma and the Black women

The second chapter would begin with a detailed description of the concept of trauma. In this chapter would mainly focus upon the trauma suffered by these Black women and how these traumatic experiences have a devastating impact on the formation of their identity . Black women in the society are subjugated not only by the white men and black men, but also by the white women. The constant domination and the acts of sexual and domestic abuse and violence (since childhood) distort the personality of these women till the time they are expected to fulfill other roles in their lives. This chapter would provide a detailed study of trauma and its psychological implications on the Black women.

3. Psyche of the Black mother

In the third chapter I would overview the role of mother and the concept of motherhood. The main thrust of this chapter would be on the psyche of the Black mother. The psycho analysis of these women would be as per the guidelines of the feminist psychoanalysis and other critical theories on motherhood and the role of mother in the society.

4. Mothers in the novels of Toni Morrison

This chapter would address the issue of unnatural and unconventional role of Black mothers as depicted in the novels of Toni Morrison. The main focus would to understand the reason behind the sadistic tendencies of these mothers which finally results in troubled and uneasy relationships with their children.

5. Mother- daughter relationship in the novels of Toni Morrison

The content of this chapter would be the study of the mother- daughter relationship in the works of the writer. The study of the relationships would be done as per the guidelines of the Object- Relation Theory which explains the relationships between people, and in particular within a family, especially between a mother and a child. The same theory would also help to explain how the nature of slavery affected the style of motherhood as depicted in the novels of Toni Morrison.

6.Conclusion

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